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Joy and Strain in Shared Parishes: Look Who's Here

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Commonweal

Published on *Commonweal Magazine* (<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org>)

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Parishioners at St. Joseph's, a shared parish in Amarillo, Texas (Bill McCullough).

Editors' Note: We've asked a number of authors to discuss the state of the American parish and what it means to be church in a time of migration and movement. We also wanted to offer practical suggestions for how parishes can be more welcoming, just, and Spirit-filled in these times. Together, our contributors provide a picture of the U.S. church today, one not so much in decline as undergoing a profound transition. To read all the articles, see the entire collection, [The American Parish Today](#).^[1]

When my parents left their hometown in central Indiana in 1966, theirs was the “German” parish, though about the only thing really German about it was the heritage of many of the parishioners. I never knew that parish—St. Joseph, a large, gray neo-Gothic edifice on Market Street downtown. My parents were married there a couple of years after my mother converted to Catholicism. Then they moved to California, where I was born. Decades later, in my thirties, I began to visit my extended family in Indiana more frequently. St. Joseph's was now All Saints, a single combined parish for the entire town. Latin American and Southeast Asian immigrants had moved in to work at the pork-processing plant, and there was a Spanish Mass. By my last visit, a good number of the congregants even at the English Mass were Hispanic.

The town I grew up in lies in suburban Orange County, south of Los Angeles. As a child I rode my bike among the endless subdivisions, and almost everyone I encountered was white. By the late 1970s, however, refugees from Southeast Asia and other immigrants began settling in the area, and our parish

offered a late-afternoon Vietnamese Mass, so remote from the rest of the life of the parish that we hardly knew it was there. In the mid-80s, I went off to college, and by the time I moved back to California decades later, my home parish had not only a Vietnamese Mass but a Spanish Mass as well. My mother found herself helping to organize a multilingual, multicultural Thanksgiving Day Mass.

In both cases, local demographic change had turned our hometown parishes into *shared parishes*, each with two or more distinct cultural, racial, or ethnic groups whose regular worship and ministries were separate, but who used the same parish facilities and were served by the same clergy leadership. Perhaps most Mass-going Catholics in the United States today have at least visited a shared parish on vacation. But at the same time, very little specific data about them has emerged. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) found in 2013 that fewer than one-third of U.S. parishes had Mass in a language other than English (in four-fifths of those cases, the Mass was in Spanish). In 2014, Boston College's National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry reported that just over half of the parishioners at parishes with Hispanic ministry were not Hispanic, and that on average half or more of the Masses at such parishes took place in a language other than Spanish. Over the past decade or so, my students and I have studied various dioceses around the United States and calculated the percentage of parishes with Mass in more than one language. Dioceses in "gateway" cities and states where immigrants have been arriving for decades showed a majority of parishes with multilingual Mass schedules—in the most immigrant-rich dioceses, it was usually a supermajority and as high as 75 percent (Los Angeles) or 81 percent (Miami). Across the Midwest and South, where demographic transformations began in earnest in the 1990s, the percentage lay somewhere between 15 and 45 percent.

[In 1950, U.S. Catholics were regionally concentrated in the Northeast & Midwest. Since then, it's migrated to the South & West. See the data here.] ^[2]

Shared parishes were almost never the result of a pastoral plan but rather an ad hoc response to demographic change ^[2]. They constitute a kind of "middle way" between parishes that simply refuse to accommodate newcomers (or will only do so if the newcomers adapt English-language Masses and Euro-American Catholic customs) and those parishes that, de jure or de facto, devote their entire communal life to a particular racial, ethnic, or language group. A few shared parishes remain breathtaking in their diversity, such as St. Camillus in a Maryland suburb of Washington D.C., where Mass is held in English, French, and Spanish, and distinct ministries exist for Mexican, Central American, Francophone African, Haitian, Bangali, and African-American Catholics ^[3]. Here in Los Angeles, I have personally visited and researched an inner-city African-American and Hispanic parish, a historically Mexican parish gentrified into multicultural affluence (but retaining a Spanish Mass), and a suburban parish with English-speaking Mexican Americans, Filipinos, and Spanish-speaking Mexican and Central American immigrants. The most common kind of shared parish, however, remains the combination of a Euro-American English-speaking community and a Spanish-speaking community of Latin American descent.

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Shared parishes juxtapose unity and difference, sometimes emphasizing one side and sometimes the other. The best such parishes balance the two effectively, providing safe space for different groups to worship and minister in their own way, but also joining those groups together in certain activities—liturgy, parish maintenance, festivals, committees—that offer an experience of the parish as a common project. Some native-born Americans object to the preservation of safe space for difference in shared parishes, insisting that Spanish Masses or Simbang Gabi celebrations just foreground the racial or ethnic differences that otherwise people would take little notice of, and that such displays delay necessary assimilation. In truth, people always take note of differences, even if they do not speak of them, and such differences remain very strongly felt by immigrants bewildered by the customs of their new country. In areas with a long history of immigration, a different kind of resistance emerges, where people of all groups tend to assume that regular contact has already made them interculturally competent enough—they have little more to learn from one another. Probably the deepest resistance to the unity-in-diversity model in shared parishes comes from patterns of avoidance. We tolerate one another well, but there are few or no opportunities to encounter one another as human beings and as equals.

Theologian Susan Reynolds speaks of shared parishes as “borderlands,”^[4] and they often do bring out the tensions, encounters, hybrid identities, and absurdities that we associate with lands near national boundaries. Regarding tensions, there are the angry battles over parish-room space, between-Mass confusion over the parking lot, and the occasional prejudicial complaints about “the Mexicans” (or, on the other side, “the white people”) uttered with disdain. An English-speaking Mexican American woman married to a white man spoke of how other whites would vociferously complain about “the Mexicans,” seemingly unaware that she was also Mexican.

On a more positive note, shared parishes also engender a lot of “code-switching,” where people naturally adjust their behavior depending on whom they’re speaking with. A Puerto Rican refers to the same priest by his first name in English settings, but always as “Padre” in Spanish. Then there are the beautiful and rich encounters that may occur. People deliver the peace in their neighbor’s unfamiliar language at a bilingual Mass, surprising their pew mates; older Euro-Americans fawn over the young children of their immigrant parish-council colleagues; people from multiple cultures pray the rosary in different languages at the same time in matched rhythm; and people sing the bilingual parts of the Mass without hesitation and in unity.

There are also absurdities, sometimes exasperating, other times humorous. A middle-schooler tells me after Mass how he was scolded by an adult for speaking Spanish (at recess!) to another child who had just arrived from Mexico. A couple with steadfast anti-immigrant views declare their love for the afternoon bilingual Mass. Celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, there are ebullient calls and responses of “Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe” (long live the Virgin of Guadalupe), and “Viva Mexico,” but then the Mexican priest eyes our modest group of visiting Anglos and cries out, “Viva Estados Unidos” (long live the United States), a cry so unexpected for the occasion that the whole congregation begins to laugh, we visitors included.

In my experience and research, there are four big challenges in shared parish life. First, the language barrier figures prominently, even in areas where bilingualism is common. People grow nervous not knowing how to speak with one another, or they commit offense unintentionally. Even where translation is readily available, it has its politics. Translating secretaries soften up blunt complaints for their monolingual priest (often to his chagrin). Language barriers lead to culture clash, as when communities accustomed to avoiding mention of death find themselves face-to-face with the skeletons and candied skulls of the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*). Second, culture clash emerges in daily misunderstanding—perplexity at why white people do not shake hands with everyone when they enter a room (as in Latin American custom), why Mexicans double park on major feast days, and why African-American liturgies are so long—but it also manifests itself in misinterpretation of different approaches to key parish activities such as fundraising, popular devotions, and the emotional tone of the liturgy.

The third and most difficult challenge to confront in shared parishes has to do with the way the larger U.S. society seeps into parish life. We suppose and celebrate the equality of all Christians in our common baptism and one faith, but we live in an unequal society where injustice persists. How do we maintain equality at the parish when at local workplaces all the bosses are from one cultural group and all the workers are from another? How does one exclude from parish life the unconscious biases and half-conscious stereotypes that appear on the streets or in the stores? How do we keep the differences embedded in societal structures out of the structures of the parish? The answer, of course, is that we rarely can. Affluent people of one group struggle to separate out their parish interactions with another group from interactions with the same people who serve as their gardeners and housekeepers. Because of educational advantages or longtime presence in the parish, parish professional staff (parish associates, directors of religious education, music directors, youth ministers) often come from dominant groups, even sometimes when the volunteer-led immigrant choirs or youth groups are far larger than their own. Middle-class Euro-American volunteers think nothing of using parish resources (reasoning that they give on Sunday), while working-class Hispanic parishioners host fundraising events for every penny they spend.

These inequalities between cultural, racial, and ethnic communities pose significant challenges. When I give workshops, people do not want to talk about power dynamics in the parish. To speak of inequality

or injustice in the parish itself brings long simmering resentments out into the open, provokes fears of being branded as racist, and sparks worry that conflict will consume the community. Addressing inequalities raises thorny questions about who should work for the parish, about accurate representation on parish committees or at multicultural liturgies, about who gets to use which rooms, when, and why. Many immigrants come from places where rules are never equitably enforced and fairness is hobbled by corruption, while native-born Americans often assume that fairness and equitably enforced rules will settle everything. We can struggle to see how fairness may not translate to justice, that equal opportunities may be technically available but not truly accessible, and that people born in the United States have a kind of home-field advantage when it comes to interpreting and following the rules. At one parish I studied, the African-American lay leadership insisted that members of the Hispanic immigrant community attend monthly liturgy meetings so that everyone had a voice and was on the same page, but the translation offered at the meetings was so poor that the Hispanics could not meaningfully participate. The situation looked fair but was actually unjust.

Finally, there is the grief that comes with change. Fr. Stephen Dudek, a priest of the Diocese of Grand Rapids who writes and presents frequently on shared parish life, calls shared parishes “crucibles of grief.” Immigrants struggle with all they have left behind—family, culture, language, home. (I once visited the father of an undocumented immigrant in Mexico; when I brought back a photo of him, his daughter wept at how much he had aged.) People in receiving communities see their hometowns transformed by different languages, restaurants, social media, stores, and music. In places where immigration is a relatively new phenomenon, the emotional whiplash can feel particularly acute. Age differences between communities exacerbate the issue, as when, for example, an aging white or African-American community finds itself paired with a young Hispanic or Asian community. At the same time, grief in the face of change is such a common human experience that everyone can relate. Once clued in, we recognize emotions that may at first shock us—anger, longing, sadness, depression—as part of a process of letting go. Recognition that everyone grieves what they have lost can engender more sensitivity, perhaps especially to elders who find themselves dealing with multiple experiences of loss near the end of their lives.

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People often ask me to offer them a packaged program or set of bullet points on how to successfully navigate shared parish life, but nothing can replace the long, sometimes challenging, ultimately joyful process ^[5] of communities getting to know one another and learning to cooperate. I will say that time helps a great deal. A shared parish I attended in New York City, and another my wife attended in Chicago, had juggled two language communities for decades, and most parishioners were unbothered by cultural differences. They continually committed themselves to cooperation across the communities, and they genuinely wanted a parish of equal partners, even if the larger societal dynamics kept getting in the way. I would also argue that having a priest-pastor (or a lay parish-life director) with a vision of equal partnership goes a long way. One pastor I know worked hard to confuse people as to which community was his favorite. He would also intervene if any pastoral leader began to speak of one group’s needs as more important than those of others.

As Catholics, however, we cannot and should not expect our often-overburdened priests to always come to the rescue in a context like this. These days there are far more shared parishes than there are clergy who are prepared to work interculturally, who have language skills, or who know how to express a vision of unity in difference. Our long hangover from the centralized uniformity of nineteenth-century Catholicism leads us to subtly expect that everyone will ultimately express their Catholic faith in the same way, and somehow be officially sanctioned by Rome. Such uniformity was always more an ideal than a reality, even in the heyday of medieval nostalgia, common Catholic culture, and Bing Crosby in a collar. Today’s diverse parishes require genuine acceptance of many distinct Catholic practices, tones, and styles, finding our unity in the things we truly hold in common—core beliefs like our faith in the Eucharist; sacramentality; patron saints; common prayers like the rosary; and shared pastoral leaders like our pastors, bishops, and Pope Francis. I recognize this puts us at odds with some of the ideological fervor of our times, where differences are poison and often exaggerated. The tenor of our times requires, however, that whatever our legitimate political differences, we must not speak of our immigrant brothers and sisters in Christ as if they were some sort of plague rather than people. If we can speak hatefully without any compunction, then we have lost our moral compass as a people.

In some specific aspects of shared parish life, we have come a long way; in others, wisdom and expertise has only begun to emerge. Preparing a proper multilingual or multicultural liturgy is now easier than ever; the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions has a thoughtful guidebook to show us the way. Less clear is the way forward on stewardship. Long-resident cultures sometimes lament the low collections in working-class immigrant communities. But one has to calculate expenses longtime residents may not have, such as sending money (remittances) home, as well as the cultural customs around giving in the country of origin (almost never state-sponsored, despite what people think). I would argue that the primary problem with stewardship in shared parishes is not that immigrant communities do not give; rather, it is the odious comparisons between long-established, stable communities and poorer immigrant communities. They will always make newcomers look rather unjustly like freeloaders.

The proper language and cultural idiom for faith formation still stymies us. The answer will be different for different communities, but many shared parishes thus far have emphasized either English to push people along toward assimilation (usually imitating the public-education system), or an immigrant language to facilitate the preservation of cultures. Both have their limitations. Monolingual English risks dividing families, especially in places where immigrant parents have insufficient time or resources to learn English properly. Monolingual Spanish, Vietnamese, or Korean programs keep families united, but they can compartmentalize faith as an aspect of one's culture of origin and not a matter for everyday life, much of which is lived in English. Parishes that develop some kind of bilingual program, admittedly harder to pull off, have often found a sweet spot that prepares children to pray both with their families and with their peers in the larger society. Again, there is no sure solution for every parish.

I began this essay with an account of the changes in the parishes of my parents' hometown and my own. Even in those two stories, one can see some reliably recurring patterns in shared parish life, such as the way newcomer communities emerge in response to unforeseen local pastoral needs, and how such communities are only gradually integrated into the center of parish life. Like all parishes, however, shared parishes are a product of their unique local environment. Our incarnational theology celebrates this rather than finding it a problem. All Catholic unity is communion, that is, unity amidst difference, rooted in the three-persons-but-one-God of the Holy Trinity, present as much within a family as within a parish as within the global church. That unity in difference unfolds in history, which means that the way we live our common faith constantly adjusts to a changing world. Thus, I would be foolish to say too much with certainty about shared-parish life moving forward. Instead, I look to the perfect communion that we will find only in the "eschatological parish," that is, the Reign of God. In the meantime, we do the best with what we have, struggling and celebrating.

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